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## American Dreams, Rural Realities: Family Farms in Crisis

Mark Friedberger

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Dorothy Schwieder's study is well and thoughtfully done and makes important reading for all who wish to understand Iowa and American agricultural history in the twentieth century. Its great strengths come from the skillful way she has related Iowa's Extension programs over the years to major national developments and trends in American agriculture and at the same time put them in the context of Iowa agriculture. While many histories of Cooperative Extension are so narrowly written that its importance in American agricultural development is unclear, this study sets an admirable standard. It is hardly surprising that Wayne D. Rasmussen, leading scholar in American agricultural history and author of *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension* (1989), has characterized her work as "the best Extension history that I have read."

*American Dreams, Rural Realities: Family Farms in Crisis*, by Peggy F. Barlett. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. xxii, 305 pp. Tables, charts, references, notes, maps, bibliography, appendixes, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY MARK FRIEDBERGER, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

The publication of Peggy Barlett's book about the farm crisis in Georgia in the 1980s suggests that a reappraisal of that miserable decade is in order. Most of the commentary on the farm downturn came from those sympathetic to the plight of the struggling farm families. Scholars and journalists stressed the wrenching despair of a farm loss and the trauma that it caused, rather than the complex issues that a severe recession brought to rural America. Barlett's book stands with those who believe that farmers were victims of circumstances, rather than individuals who brought problems on themselves through poor judgment.

When the history of the late twentieth century is written, and the impact of the farm protest movement of those years is analyzed, Iowa's position will be given considerable prominence. For unlike Barlett's Dodge County, Georgia, where there was no farm advocacy activity, Iowa organizations such as PrairieFire Rural Action had a great impact on the outcome of mobilization efforts to solve the crisis. They pushed for foreclosure moratoria, the initiation of mediation, fairer lending regulations, and the implementation of a farm bankruptcy chapter in 1986. Pressure from farm advocates turned the farm crisis in Iowa into a political issue that no politician could ignore.

Eventually, the Iowa model of mobilization—hotlines, mediation, and other practices—was used in other states.

In many ways the neopopulist advocates pulled off a remarkable coup. The agricultural establishment went on the defensive, and although some of its representatives protested in 1985–1986 that the crisis was not nearly as serious as the media and the advocates claimed, and that measures that the authorities took were unnecessary, they were ignored. As it turned out, government intrusion into the financial affairs of farm families proved expensive to taxpayers. Because the rescue of the Farm Credit Administration came before the savings and loan crisis and bailout, it went virtually unnoticed. But the infusion of four billion dollars to the principal farm lender proved again that farmers received favorable treatment far in excess of their need and political clout.

Where does Barlett's book stand in relation to this interpretation? In many ways *American Dreams* is two books. The first deals with the structural aspects of farming in the contemporary South—part-time operations and women's involvement on the farm, for instance—and the second with the downturn. As there was no farm advocacy group in Georgia, the crisis amounted to little more than families stoically struggling to survive in isolation. But Barlett might have missed an important dimension to the protest movement because her research design failed to probe the 1970s, when the American Agricultural Movement (AAM) was active in Georgia. Ironically, although Barlett gave a historical dimension to her work, she failed to explore the grass roots effect of the cost price squeeze in the 1970s which forced the AAM to use tractorcades and disruptive protest tactics in Washington.

While the book is full of important insights about contemporary agriculture, it suffers from two recurring problems in social science analyses. First, like most social scientists, Barlett relied on interviews, which are only as good as the interviewers who collect them. Many factors affect their success: rapport between researcher and respondent, careful preparation, and a mastery of the subject matter at hand, including immersion in primary source materials before fieldwork commences. If Barlett had read the local newspapers and the regional farm press in the 1970s and 1980s, she might have had some interesting views about AAM. She also would have been better equipped to place her sophisticated analysis into a framework with relevance to the real world, a second challenge for social scientists. Given that Barlett is an anthropologist with ethnographic training, her book is surprisingly wooden, partly because it is mired in the rigid conceptions of sociology.

Barlett is careful to integrate her Georgia findings with those from other states. In fact, though, Dodge County was very different from the Midwest. Instead of looking for similarities, Barlett should have stressed differences. Rather than concentrating on the 1980s entirely, she should have integrated events of the previous decade. Given the passage of time, Barlett also could have made some effort to reappraise the thesis of farmer as victim in the financial crisis. The important work of the political scientist William P. Browne—whom Barlett ignores, and who made a searching analysis from a national perspective of the farm crisis as a protest movement—might have nudged her to contribute a fresh perspective on trends in rural America in the 1980s.

But to give Barlett her due, she never intended to write anything more than a case study of the farm crisis at the grass roots. In that guise *American Dreams* makes a notable contribution to our understanding of southern farm life during a period of stress and malaise.

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